

Menu Requirements

School Meals Initiative for Healthy Children

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) School Meals Initiative for Healthy Children underscores our national health responsibility to provide healthy school meals that are consistent with age appropriate Recommended Dietary Allowances (RDA) and caloric goals, and the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*.

Healthy School Meals

The concept of a healthy school meal encompasses more than just meeting the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*. It also means considering the following additional goals whenever possible:

Goals:

- Incorporate culinary principles of taste and presentation.
- Focus on customers served, incorporating regional, cultural, ethnic, and other preferences.
- Provide safe meals for children.
- Make meals accessible to all children.
- Reinforce classroom nutrition education by providing a “learning laboratory” for healthy food choices.
- Assist in increasing appreciation of food origins, cultural food history, variety of foods, and relationship to environment and agriculture.
- Support and teach the principles of the “social meal.”
- Provide education in the preparation and service of healthy, economical meals.

- Serve in an encouraging environment with adequate time for meal service.
- Link with a school nutrition policy promoting healthy food choices throughout the school.

Implementing a Menu Planning System

USDA has identified four alternative menu planning systems: Enhanced Food Based Menus, Traditional Food Based Menus, NuMenus (Nutrient Standard Menu Planning), and Assisted NuMenus (Assisted Nutrient Standard Menu Planning). For additional information regarding the use of other menu options, contact the Office of School Food Services and Nutrition.

The choice of menu planning system to use is made by each School Food Authority (SFA). SFAs may choose more than one system to accommodate the needs of schools within the SFA. Menu planners are faced with tremendous challenges and opportunities for improving the health of American children. Serving healthier meals is a major step toward achieving that objective.

Meet Nutrition Goals

The objective of all four menu planning systems is to meet the following USDA School Meals Initiative for Healthy Children’s nutrition goals:

- Recommended Dietary Allowances (RDA)
 - 1/4 RDA for Breakfast
 - 1/3 RDA for Lunch
- Calorie Goals—Age appropriate
- *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*—Balanced nutrient content

The Nutrient Standards that are set for the four menu planning systems—Enhanced Food Based Menus, Traditional Food Based Menus, NuMenus, and Assisted NuMenus—are based on the required level of calories, nutrients and dietary components; and by weighting and averaging the RDA for a specific age or grade group. Planned and offered breakfast and/or lunch menus averaged over a week should meet the Nutrient Standard of the age or grade group for which they are intended. Meeting these standards is the goal for all four menu planning systems.

Calories and Nutrients in the Nutrient Standards

Standards are set for:

- Calories
- 30 percent or less calories from fat
- Less than 10 percent calories from saturated fat
- Protein
- Calcium
- Iron
- Vitamin A
- Vitamin C

Other nutrients and dietary components that are evaluated are carbohydrate, cholesterol, sodium, and dietary fiber. While there are no quantity standards set for these dietary components, they must be included in the menu evaluations except carbohydrate, which is optional. They will be surveyed over time to check on the implementation of the *Dietary Guidelines* to determine whether:

- The carbohydrate level is going up,
- Cholesterol and sodium levels are going down, and
- The dietary fiber level is going up.

Establishment of the Nutrient Standards Grade Groups

The Nutrient Standards for lunch and breakfast are set, at a minimum, for these grade levels:

Breakfast required grade groups

Preschool

Grades K–12

Plus optional standard for grades 7–12

Lunch required grade groups

Preschool

Grades K–6

Grades 7–12

Plus optional standard for grades K-3

Table 1 Section 12A Required Minimum Calorie and Nutrient Levels for Enhanced Food Based, Traditional Food Based, and Nutrient Analysis Menu Planning Systems for SCHOOL LUNCHES by Grade Levels (School Week Averages)

Nutrients and Energy Allowances	Minimum Requirements			Optional
	Preschool	Grades K–6	Grades 7–12	Grades K–3
Energy Allowance/Calories	517	664	825	633
Total Fat (as a percent of actual total food energy) ¹	(1)	(1)	(1)	(1)
Saturated Fat (as a percent of actual total food energy) ²	(2)	(2)	(2)	(2)
RDA for Protein (g)	7	10	16	9
RDA for Calcium (mg)	267	286	400	267
RDA for Iron (mg)	3.3	3.5	4.5	3.3
RDA for Vitamin A (RE)	150	224	300	200
RDA for Vitamin C (mg)	14	15	18	15

Table 2 Section 12A Required Minimum Calorie and Nutrient Levels for Enhanced Food Based, Traditional Food Based, and Nutrient Analysis Menu Planning Systems for SCHOOL BREAKFASTS by Grade Levels (School Week Averages)

Nutrient and Energy Allowances	Minimum Requirements		Optional
	Preschool	Grades K-6	Grades 7-12
Energy Allowance/Calories	388	554	618
Total Fat (as a percent of actual total food energy) ¹	(1)	(1)	(1)
Saturated fat (as a percent of actual total food energy) ²	(2)	(2)	(2)
Protein (g)	5	10	12
Calcium (mg)	200	257	300
Iron (mg)	2.5	3.0	3.4
Vitamin A (RE)	113	197	225
Vitamin C (mg)	11	13	14

Notes: